

Laocoön and His Sons.

The Myth about the Myth

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THE statue *Laocoön and his Sons* (fig. 1) was found on 14th of January 1506 in a subterranean chamber with an adorned floor and coloured walls in a vineyard in the vicinity of the church of San Pietro in Vincoli, north-east of the Colosseum.¹ This information originates from a letter by the son of Giuliano da Sangallo, the pope's architect at this time.² The exact site of the find is unknown, but it has to be situated in the area of the *domus aurea* of Nero. Probably, it was a room of the Baths of Trajan which would correspond with the information that Pliny the Elder gives in the 36th book of his *Natural History*:

nec deinde multo plurium fama est, quorundam claritati in operibus eximiis obstante numero artificum, quoniam nec unus occupat gloriam nec plures pariter nuncupari possunt, sicut in Laocoonte, qui est in Titi imperatoris domo, opus omnibus et picturae et statuariae artis praeferendum. ex uno lapide eum ac liberos draconumque mirabiles nexus de consilii sententia fecere summi artifices Hagesander et Polydorus et Athenodorus Rhodii.³

But if Pliny mentions the 'Palace of Titus' he probably means the *domus aurea* of the emperor Nero, since Titus did not have a new palace of his own. Later, a large part of the *domus aurea* was overbuilt by the Baths of Trajan. Thus, it is possible that the statue stayed in the same area and was just relocated to the Baths.⁴ Nevertheless the 'Palace of Titus' or this part of the *domus aurea* is probably not the original location of the statue. Unfortunately, this has to remain uncertain. Since its discovery the statue

¹Sichtermann 1957, 10–11; Daltrop 1982, 9.

²Preiß 1992, 59.

³Plin. *HN* XXXVI 4.37: "The reputation of some, distinguished though their work may be, has been obscured by the number of artists engaged with them on a single task, because no individual monopolizes the credit nor again can several of them be named on equal terms. This is the case with the Laocoon in the palace of the emperor Titus, a work superior to any painting and any bronze. Laocoon, his children and the wonderful claspings coils of the snakes were carved from a single block in accordance with an agreed plan by those eminent craftsmen Hagesander, Polydorus and Athenodorus, all of Rhodes." Trans. Eichholz (1962).

⁴Muth 2005, 76.

has been standing in the Vatican Museums except for the years 1797–1815, when it was transferred to the Louvre under the Treaty of Tolentino.⁵

The statue consists of Greek marble. There are three persons and two snakes depicted in front of an altar. The figures are approximately full-size and composed of a bearded man as well as a boy on each of his sides. The left one is smaller than the right one which implies an age difference. All figures are nearly naked since their garments have slid down. Furthermore they are squirming and writhing; their faces are extremely distorted, whereas the snakes are coiling around them so that the human part of the group seems to be chained and immobilized. Clearly a death struggle is presented.

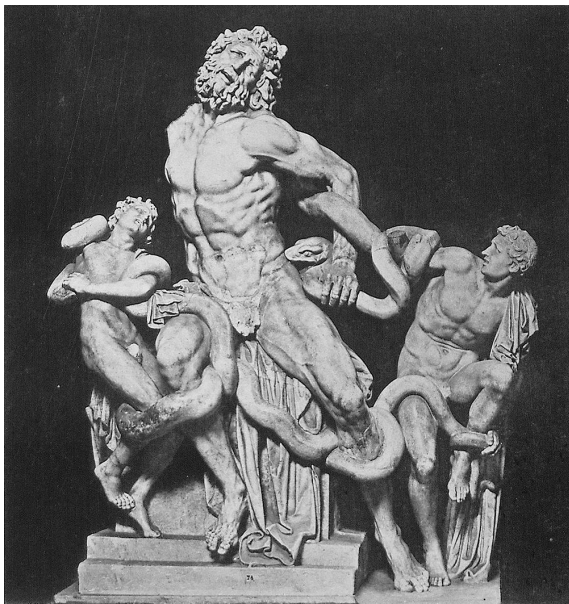


Fig. 1: Laocoön and his sons, known as the Laocoön Group. The Vatican Museums, Pius-Clementine Museum, Octagonal Courtyard Inv. 1059. 1064. 1067
Image from: Kekulé 1883, Taf. 2.

The left boy is already in the position of being bitten, which means he loses consciousness and/or is dying right now – the exact state cannot be determined clearly. The right boy seems to be the least affected one. He tries to get rid of the snake and looks to his father. Here it could be conceivable that he has the chance to escape the snakes, and consequently death. The dating of the statue is a very controversial subject which is discussed rather frequently. The central issue is the fact that there are many aspects supporting different propositions for the time of origin. This results in a relatively wide margin of dating – two to three hundred years by absolute numbers. If we examine the stylistic features for instance, we would probably date the statue in the late Hellenistic period.⁶ But on the other hand we have to deal with a coy hint: the three sculptors Hagesander, Polydorus and Athenodoros who are mentioned by Pliny. These three sculptors were also mentioned in an inscription of the Scylla group, a statue from a grotto of the emperor Tiberius in Sperlonga.⁷ Based on its composition and style as well as other appearances of the sculptors' names, the Scylla

group is predominantly dated in the Late Republican period (30–20 BC).⁸ If we assume that these three sculptors are identical to the ones of *Laocoön and His Sons*, the same time of construction has to be valid for this statue. But this does not exclude the possibility of a potential late Hellenistic original made of bronze. Because of the style and composition of Laocoön and his sons and the testament of Pliny some scholars like Bernard Andreae think that the statue which we know has to be a copy in marble.⁹ This would explain the distinct late Hellenistic tendencies.

⁵Daltrop 1982, 23–24.

⁶Kunze 2002, 216.

⁷Daltrop 1982, 30; Scylla group from Sperlonga: for pictures see [here](#); and [here](#).

⁸Muth 2005, 76.

⁹Andreae 1998, 216.

The episode of the misfortune of Laocoön is well known from a number of myths about the Trojan War; but the versions can be rather different. Sometimes Laocoön is punished for a particular reason; sometimes the punishment is not really motivated. In addition, the number of slaughtered victims varies (only the father and one son, versus both sons or even both sons without the father). To summarize the options one can basically distinguish between two main alternatives. The first appears in Bacchylides (520/515–451 BC); in the 3rd century BC Euphorion (276–225 BC) apparently wrote a similar version, but both poems are lost. Parts of them were passed on by Maurus Servius Honoratus in the late 4th century AD. The content is deduced as follows: Laocoön is the priest of Apollo in Troy. He transgresses propriety by being married and having two sons. Apollo sends two snakes to punish him. Euphorion's version is even more radical. Here, Laocoön sleeps with his wife Antiope in the very Temple of Apollo.¹⁰ It is possible that Sophocles (497/496–406/405 BC) also used elements of this version in his lost tragedy from the 5th century BC. There, it is assumed that the snakes could have had the names “Porkes” and “Chariboia”. Moreover it is likely that Laocoön was not killed in this version.

The second, and more popular version is the one of Vergil (70–19 BC). In the *Aeneid*, which he wrote in the second half of the 1st century BC, Laocoön is a priest of Neptune. He warns the Trojans against the wooden horse and throws a lance against it. But Athena wishes the fall of Troy, so Laocoön acts against the will of the goddess and this, finally, is his *hybris*. Consequently he has to be silenced and is punished by two snakes which are sent – in this case by Athena. During the sacrifice for Neptune the snakes which had come from Tenedos out of the sea kill first the sons and then Laocoön himself. The people of Troy interpret this calamity as a punishment for rejecting the horse, which is seen as a generous and divine gift. With this misunderstanding the fate of Troy is finally sealed. Hence the fall of Laocoön works as an omen for the fall of the whole city.¹¹

A roughly similar version could have also existed in the *Iliupersis*, perhaps of Arctinus of Miletus who probably lived in the 7th century BC. But there it is told that only Laocoön and one of his sons died.¹² Another difference is the absence of motivation for the attack or their death since there is no guilt of Laocoön mentioned. Regarding the statue it is likely that both versions were known at the time of its composition. At least it is sure that Sophocles' tragedy can be excluded as a model for the statue since both sons but not Laocoön himself are killed there.

If we want to investigate the views of scholars, and their argumentations regarding this subject-matter, we must commence from the work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing who already summed up the options of using different myths for the statue in his paper *Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie. Mit beyläufigen Erläuterungen verschiedener Punkte der alten Kunstgeschichte* (1766).¹³ Either the sculptors of

¹⁰Bacchyl. dith. fr. 9, Euphorion, fr. 80. Zintzen 1979, 64.

¹¹Verg. *Aen.* II 200–49.

¹²Procl. *Chr.* 2 (= *Iliupersis* fr. 1 Davies).

¹³Lessing 1766, 40–41.

Laocoön and his sons had Vergil's version in their mind, or the sculptors worked the statue before the time of Vergil and without an exact mythological model, or the sculptors as well as Vergil used a former version of the myth as model. He decided in favour of the first option, namely that Vergil's version of the myth was used for the statue.

Lessing substantiates this with the fact that Pliny mentions a lot of other sculptors who lived in the Early Roman Empire and worked for the Imperial family. As a result he assumes that this also applies to Hagesander, Polydorus and Athenodorus, the sculptors of Laocoön and his sons. The association with the Early Roman Empire is the reason why he comes to the conclusion that Vergil's version has to be the basis for the statue's design. Perhaps we can record this as a method based on ancient, written sources.

Bernhard Andreae considered the statue in a very comprehensive way. He presented numerous theories about dating (some more convincing than others), principals, clients, the occasion for the construction as well as the installation site. Those include the thesis of a Hellenistic original statue made of bronze, based on stylistic and compositional features. But added to this, he has reasons to deduce a whole scenario of the formation of Laocoön and his sons in that Hellenistic time. A decisive part of this is played by the supposed dependence on the group of Athena and Alkyoneus from the eastern frieze of the Pergamon Altar. In fact there are several conspicuous similarities between Alkyoneus and Laocoön by means of which Andreae locates the installation of Laocoön and his sons to Pergamon. As a time scale he proposes 140–130 BC because of the stylistic relation to the Pergamon Altar. On top of that, he mentions the visit of Scipio Aemilianus in 139 BC as a possible occasion for sculpting the statue. With regard to this dating it is obvious that Vergil's version cannot have been used as model for the statue, which would support either Bacchylides' version or a more general one.

Concerning the assumed marble copy, Andreae interprets the statue as a possible gift for the emperor Tiberius since it would thematically suit the statues of Sperlonga: Ulysses and Aeneas played an important role in the rise of Rome. Ulysses was partly responsible for the fall of Troy which led to the escape of Aeneas and finally to the foundation of Rome. Another reason for this interpretation is that Tiberius was descended as a Claudian from Ulysses and as a Julian from Aeneas, the two heroes who are responsible for the foundation of Rome. All this implies that the statue works as an addition or completion of the program in Sperlonga, but with emphasis on the role of Aeneas. Therefore Andreae sees Vergil's version represented when he contemplates the statue: Laocoön has just warned the people of Troy and has thrown his lance against the wooden horse. Now Athena sends her snakes which pull him to the altar like a sacrificial animal. According to Andreae, this serves as a portent for the impending fall of Troy and eventually the foundation of Rome. He assumes this because it fits in his concept of interpretation. His whole argumentation is based on the assumption that the statue was modeled on Vergil's version.¹⁴

On the other hand, this conjecture for the marble copy disagrees with his thesis of a Hellenistic original made of bronze. If we consider the marble statue as a faithful copy,

¹⁴ Andreae 1998, 217, 219, 221, 225–226.

it cannot be modelled after Vergil's version. The only solution for this problem would be that the copy was reinterpreted as an 'illustration' of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Because of the inconclusive manner of the composition this would not have been too difficult. Since Andreae involves a lot of other factors like the date, the site and the occasion of its installation I would summarize this method of interpretation as a 'contextual approach'. Richard Brilliant is convinced that the composition of the statue is decisive: in the *Aeneid* the sons are doubtless killed first and only then their father:

et primum parva duorum
corpora natorum serpens amplexus uterque
215 implicat, et miseros morsu depascitur artus;
post ipsum auxilio subeuntem ac tela ferentem
corripiunt [...].¹⁵

But this does not agree with the statue since the attack of the snakes is in a rather advanced state regarding the left (younger) boy and the father in comparison to the right boy. As a consequence it can be assumed that the right boy dies later or even survives. However, in the codex Vergilius Vaticanus (about 400 AD) the composition of the illustration of the Laocoön episode coincides just as little with the text of the *Aeneid* as the statue, although no one can deny that the Vergilius Vaticanus refers to Vergil's *Aeneid* (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Codex Vergilius Vaticanus, Folio 18v.

On the other hand, the illustration of the Vergilius Vaticanus could be oriented above all towards the statue which would explain the same 'incorrect' composition with regard to the literary source. In this case the composition of the group would be again a valid but not a strong argument so that Brilliant concedes that the deviating composition of the statue should not in itself disqualify the literary source.

¹⁵Verg. *Aen.* II 213–217: "First round the tender limbs of his two sons each dragon coiled, and on the shrinking flesh fixed fast and fed. Then seized they on the sire who flew to aid, a javelin in his hand [...]." Translation Fairclough (1920).

Hence Brilliant arrives at the conclusion that Vergil's *Aeneid* was indeed crucial for the romanization of the myth of Laocoön, but it probably was more a motivating power than an explicit visual source for the statue.¹⁶ Summing up Brilliant's contribution, we can give this method the title of a 'compositional approach'.

Last but not least there remains to discuss the approach of Susanne Muth, which differs from the previous arguments. She argues for the version of Bacchylides because the iconography of Laocoön in particular supports the thesis that the snakes are sent by Apollo, not Athena. If Laocoön had been displayed in the established iconography of an innocent victim who is seeking help, he would lean (probably with his knee) on the altar to beg the concerning god for help – in this case Apollo, in whose sanctuary he currently is located. But he does not do this, so the altar has to be the altar of the god who has sent the snakes, and therefore Apollo himself. This is indicative of Bacchylides' version since Athena sends the snakes in the *Aeneid*. However, the motive of his outrage is not emphasized in any imaginable way. Neither is the fact that Laocoön is a priest (his garment has fallen down) nor that there is an altar (it is hidden by the garment at the same time). These aspects lead to the conclusion that the statue was not primarily intended to illustrate a particular mythological tradition such as the punishment of Laocoön's sacrilege, but to work as an instrument to present something more general, such as agony.¹⁷

This valuable point is not to be lightly ignored. Apart from that, there is the important aspect that a missing iconography does not necessarily mean an exclusion of an option. Perhaps there were other factors which made the appearance of a kneeling Laocoön undesirable. If we consider that the composition promotes one viewpoint (the front), it seems unlikely that the sculptor would breach this harmonious image with a bent Laocoön who turns his back to the viewer. On top of that, the slight concave shape of the entire statue would be affected. This could be avoided by arranging Laocoön kneeling behind the altar so that he is again facing the viewer, but an altar in the centre of the composition and in front of Laocoön would probably cause a distraction from the actual pain and despair which should obviously be a central element of the statue group. Since the method of interpretation depends on the iconography of Laocoön I would call this kind of argumentation an 'iconographical approach'.

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Conclusions

Where does this leave us? The statue *Laocoön and his Sons* displays a certain mythical episode which can be traced back to different authors. The most famous version is in Vergil's *Aeneid*. But the episode was not his invention. In earlier times authors such as Bacchylides wrote different versions of the myth. They distinguish particularly the cause for the punishment of Laocoön: either since he behaved transgressively by marrying and fathering children as a priest or since he cautioned the people of Troy against the wooden horse. The statue itself provides no evident features which give some indication of a specific literary version used as a model. Hence, Lessing compiled the different

¹⁶Brilliant 2000, 46.

¹⁷Muth 2005, 77–78.

options and with this starting point scholars presented their methods to clarify this problem to some extent which we can summarize as follows: First, the contextual approach of Bernard Andreae which leads to Vergil for the marble copy of the statue and a more general and earlier version of the myth for a supposed bronze original. Vergil's episode is his basis to deduce the occasion of manufacturing and the intention of setting up the statue. Added to this, it supports his view on dating the statue after 31 AD since the version of Bacchylides would belong much more to the past – and does not fit his interpretation of the statue being part of a sculptural program referring to the mythological origins of the Roman empire.

Second, we have the compositional approach of Richard Brilliant which distinctly excluded the *Aeneid* as model and hence concluded that this version served merely as a trigger for depicting the myth. But excluding Vergil's version only because of the disagreeing order in which the victims are attacked dubious since the codex Vergilius Vaticanus shows a similar composition.

Lastly, we have the iconographical approach of Susanne Muth which is indicative of Bacchylides' version. Although he stands in front of the altar, Laocoön does not implore the god for help. As a consequence the snakes must have been sent by this god. At the same time the myth fades into the background as the priestly context in the form of the altar is nearly hidden. We might say that the *performance* of punishment is eventually more important than the *cause* of it.

Each approach has its utility and limitations. However, we are able to register several points: first of all we noticed that neither the composition nor the iconography of Laocoön and his sons is very conclusive. Both provide no sufficient distinct evidence for a certain version of the myth displayed. On that account, I would prefer to focus on the contextual approach. Like Bernard Andreae I think the dating of the statue plays a central role. Unfortunately this aspect is also an uncertain and unresolved topic. Nevertheless after a close examination it seems to me the most probable case that the statue was made in the second half of the 1st century BC. This dating is primarily based on the sculptors' names Hagesander, Polydorus and Athenodorus who also appear on the Scylla group. The names Athenodorus and Hagesander emerge in the years 22 and 21 BC again, and the Scylla group is dated to a similar period. Considering this supposed dating as well as the associated specific spirit and cultural setting of this time I would cautiously presume that the sculptors of Laocoön and his sons had Vergil's version of the myth in their mind. Due to the fact that the *Aeneid* was written in the second half of the 1st century BC, a higher popularity, presence or recognition could be assumed for this version. Moreover I would like to emphasize the low focalisation of the mythological model for the statue. The sculptors' intention seems to have been the general representation of a horrific scene of despair and pain to create a voyeuristic moment for ancient viewers; the grounds behind the punishment were probably not of paramount significance to them.

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Abbreviations of ancient authors and texts are according to The Oxford Classical Dictionary.

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